

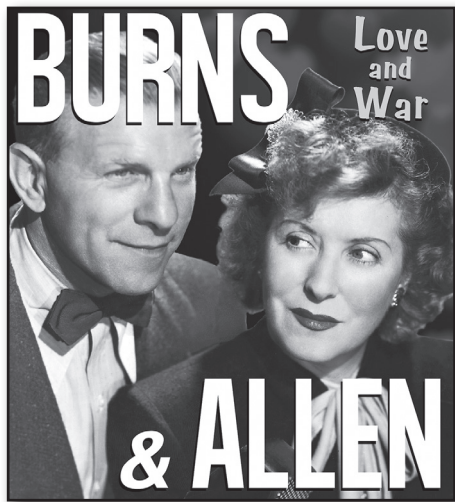
BURNS & ALLEN

Love and War

Program Guide by Elizabeth McLeod

It was a time of transition for America -- from the threadbare 1930s to the wartime 1940s. It was a time of transition for radio -- from the freewheeling experimentation of network broadcasting's first decade to the streamlined formats of its thriving maturity. And it was a time of transition for one of radio's most popular comedy teams -- those veterans of stage, screen, and microphone: George Burns and Gracie Allen.

It was 1940. Europe was at war, and so was Asia. America sat aloof, or so it imagined, as life went on. In radio studios, songs were sung, jokes were told, and broadcasting went right along pretty much as had been going for the past fourteen years. The legion of stage stars who paraded into radio when Broadway collapsed in the early 1930s were mostly still in evidence, many of them as popular as ever. But for Burns and



Allen, things weren't quite right. Their 1939-40 season, for the drugstore-and-household-product firm of Lehn & Fink (on behalf of its Hinds Honey and Almond Cream), had been successful enough. Gracie's publicity-stunt of running for President (on the Surprise Party ticket) built interest in the program over the winter and into the spring. But that gag had run its course as the season wound down. Building national tensions sug-

gested that a joke presidential campaign might not be in the best of taste, and when the season came to a close that June, Lehn & Fink decided to move on.

That had been happening to George and Gracie a lot lately. Since the end of their long-term relationship with General Cigar Company in 1935, Burns and Allen had been sponsored by Campbell Soup, Liggett & Myers Tobacco (below), and General Foods. When Lehn & Fink handed them their notice, it made for their fourth cancellation in the past five seasons. Clearly something wasn't quite right, and George Burns and his writing staff spent a lot of time (and smoked a lot of cigars) debating what it might be. During the course of the 1930s, their program had evolved from a straight vaudeville format (with George and Gracie doing their stage-proven material into a microphone) to a setup that resembled the formula of George's great friend Jack Benny (with George as a put-upon fall guy, Gracie his wisecracking partner, and the announcer, bandleader, and tenor vocalist of the moment making up the rest of the obligatory "gang").

But still there was something lacking. Each member of Jack Benny's "gang" had a distinctive, engaging personality. But other than George and Gracie themselves, the Burns-and-Allen gang never quite jelled into a similar entourage. That put nearly all the comic burden of the program on the two leading players -- and though they carried it well,

there were moments over the course of a long broadcasting season where the formula strained and the weaknesses showed. Their return to the tried-and-true running gag formula with Gracie's burlesqued run for President in the spring of 1940 generated plenty of attention -- but as the world situation grew more tense that year, the performers felt that it was best to drop the gag and move on. Something truly new and fresh was needed.



Burns & Allen Chesterfield advertisement for Liggett & Myers Tobacco

Meanwhile, another prominent entertainment personality of 1940 was also looking for something new. In the fall of 1939, bandleader Artie Shaw (right) was riding a crest of national popularity with a string of best-selling records, late-night broadcasts from the Blue Room of the Hotel Lincoln in Manhattan, and a weekly network showcase co-starring humorist Robert Benchley. He soon decided that he'd had enough of autograph seekers, jitterbugs, song pluggers, agents, and all the rest of the show-business hangers-on. So one November night, Shaw packed his clarinet into its case and hopped a plane for Mexico, abandoning his band mid-engagement. He announced that he was finished with the music business forever. So there.



Artie Shaw

But then, sheepish and running low on funds, Shaw turned up in California deciding that those easy swing-band dollars weren't such a bad thing to have a lot of after all. He fooled around with a group of studio musicians and put together an interesting string-and-woodwind combination that promptly scored a hit record with a tune he'd picked up in Mexico. You couldn't walk down a street in the spring of 1940 without hearing "Frenesi" coming out of somebody's window. And suddenly Artie Shaw, whose bridges were supposed to have been well and truly incinerated behind him, was a hot property again. He made a couple of forgettable films, he eloped to Las Vegas with Lana Turner, and he formed yet another new band - which promptly hit the jackpot with a sumptuous take on "Stardust." The marriage didn't last (Lana dumped him after just four months), but the band did. So the agency packaging the latest Burns and Allen radio venture brought Shaw and his orchestra on board to replace the departing Ray Noble.

It was an interesting choice. Even in 1940, Burns and Allen had a whiff of old-timeyness about them. Their material hearkened back to the Good Old Days of Vaudeville. That was now, arguably, one of the reasons why they couldn't seem to hold on to a sponsor. Bringing a dynamic, contemporary musician like Shaw onto the program gave the show an instant



Burns & Allen Spam advertisement for The Geo. A. Hormel Packing Company

youth appeal that it had previously been lacking. And Shaw's ongoing efforts to re-imagine himself as the choice of the "sophisticated" swing fan might even bring along a more urbane audience. The Geo. A. Hormel Packing Company certainly hoped so, for that concern would become the latest in the long line of Burns and Allen sponsors...on behalf of its recently-introduced and increasingly popular canned pork loaf, Spam. Shaw might have winced at the product, but not at the juicy paycheck that came with it.

The new series kicked off two months ahead of the typical fall radio debut, making it one of the few big-name features on the air during radio's usual summer doldrums, and the critics liked it. George and Gracie were still George and Gracie, but as the new series worked itself into form, the scripts took on more of a situation comedy approach. Burns and Allen weren't yet playing a married couple, and they still followed a variation of the Jack Benny "gang" format rather than going in for full blown sitcom plots, but over the course of the season the sketches became more plot-driven. Artie Shaw -- however reluctantly -- would be drawn into the routines in comic roles, often as the unwilling target of Gracie's romantic fixations. It was his very public distaste for doing this sort of material that had caused problems during his series with Benchley. However, whatever issues he may have had with clowning it up alongside George and Gracie, he managed to keep them to himself. George and Gracie themselves experimented with their own characterizations during this era, building George into a very Benny-like figure, as vain about his singing as Jack was about his violin. And Gracie took on an increasingly Mary Livingstone-like acerbity in her dialogue with George. Increasingly, the sketches turned less around vaudevillian wordplay than around the almost ritual humiliation of George. There were even elements of serialization, with George dealing with a predatory

singer, gangsters, and Gracie's new career as a playwright in storylines that stretched out over several weeks' worth of broadcasts.

Burns and Allen wanted something different, and their new series provided it. Unfortunately, the ratings weren't enough to justify the program's high cost, and at the end of the season Hormel gave notice that it wouldn't pick up their option for a second year. But that single season left significant legacies for all involved. For George Burns and Gracie Allen, the format experimentation during the Spam series led them to the most drastic shift of their entire careers. When they picked up Lever Brothers as yet another sponsor in the fall of 1941, the program adopted a straight situation comedy format, featuring the "George and Gracie" characters as a married couple. They weren't quite the real-life George and Gracie -- or maybe they were. Either way, the shift marked a complete change in the style of the program to the format that would carry it on radio and television until Gracie broke up the act with her retirement in 1958. For Artie Shaw, the series taught him that, however lucrative it might be, the life of a weekly star on commercial radio wasn't for him. He never had another featured role on a network program, and spent the rest of his musical career experimenting with new styles, new approaches, and new ideas in jazz before finally giving up music entirely and moving on to other artistic challenges.

And for the Geo. A. Hormel Company, Minnesota meatpacking firm, their year of sponsoring Burns and Allen had the most lasting legacy of all. The actual George A. Hormel (below) pronounced his name "HORmul," as do his descendants. But company officials became so taken by announcer Bud Heistand's on-air pronunciation of the name as "horMEL" that it became the official pronunciation used by the company to this day. As for Spam, it's still very much a factor in the canned-pork-product market, even though many people today think first of unwanted email when they hear the word. No doubt George and Gracie, if they were with us in the 21st Century, could get a good routine out of that.



George A. Hormel

**LEHN & FINK, INC.
GEO. A. HORMEL & COMPANY
and
LEVER BROTHERS COMPANY
present**

GEORGE BURNS AND GRACIE ALLEN

With

Irving Lee as “Senor Lee”

Songs by

Frank Parker, The Smoothies, and Jimmy Cash

Music by

Ray Noble and his Orchestra

Artie Shaw and his Orchestra

Paul Whiteman and his Orchestra

Announcers

Truman Bradley, Bud Heistand, and Bill Goodwin

CD 1A: “Swiss Family Robinson” - 06/12/1940

Gracie has a car accident, and the cast performs their version of “Swiss Family Robinson.”



Announcer
Truman Bradley

**CD 1B: “Last Broadcast for CBS”
- 06/26/1940**

It’s the last show of the Hinds Honey and Almond Cream series, with final appearances by Ray Noble and Frank Parker.



Announcer Bill Goodwin

CD 2A: “Kiddie Party” - 07/29/1940

George and Gracie are invited to a “kiddie” themed party at the swanky Coconut Grove.

CD 2B: “George’s Movie” - 08/05/1940

George has a movie idea for producer Joe Pasternak.

CD 3A: “Gold Rush Gracie” - 08/12/1940

George remembers the old days in vaudeville, and the cast performs “Gold Rush Gracie.”

CD 3B: “George Late For Show” - 08/19/1940

George is ready to break up the act with Gracie. He even has a new partner: Elsie Tralfaz!

CD 4A: “Elsie Trellafas Is Suing George” - 08/26/1940

It didn’t work out so well with Elsie Tralfaz...and now she’s suing George!

CD 4B: “George Is On Trial” - 09/02/1940

George goes to court to answer Elsie’s breach of promise charges.

CD 5A: “Impressing Cobina Wright” - 01/13/1941

Gracie tries to impress “celebutante” Cobina Wright Jr. (below).

CD 5B: “Visits Art Gallery” - 01/20/1941

Gracie gets a letter from her brother Willie, and Cobina is still hanging around George.

CD 6A: “The Five Thousand Dollar Mink Coat” - 01/27/1941

George gave Cobina a \$5,000 mink coat by mistake...and now he’s trying to get her back. Ms. Wright’s mother has other ideas.

CD 6B: “Fort Sheridan” - 02/03/1941

George and Gracie discuss their show for the troops in the Chicago area.

CD 7A: “Where’s Willie” - 02/17/1941

There seems to be some difficulty locating Gracie’s brother.



Cobina Wright, Jr.

CD 7B: “George Is Jealous” - 03/03/1941

George is in a rage over Artie’s romance with Gracie and threatens to fire him.

CD 8A: “First Show” - 10/07/1941

It’s the premiere of “The New Burns and Allen Show,” featuring George and Gracie in a new situation comedy format. They’re looking for a singer for their new series.

CD 8B: “New Singer” - 10/14/1941

Grocery clerk Jimmy Cash is the new musical voice of the program -- and he shows up to rehearse while George is trying to eat his breakfast!



Gracie Allen & George Burns

Elizabeth McLeod is a journalist, author, and broadcast historian. She received the 2005 Ray Stanich Award for excellence in broadcasting history research from the Friends Of Old Time Radio.



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